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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000979

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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: US COUNCIL ON INTL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
STAFF VISIT

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Classified By: Political-Economic Section Chief Rob Garverick
for reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: From 07-12 December 2009, Embassy Baku hosted Catherine Cosman and Mary Zeng from the staff of the U.S. Council for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). Cosman and Zeng met a wide range of official and religious contacts before attending a 10-11 December human rights conference sponsored by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Among the most important meetings was an almost two hour discussion with Hidayat Orucov, head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Structures (SCWRS). Orucov repeated the oft-spoken mantra that Azerbaijan is a country of religious tolerance. In addition to the normal rhetoric, however, Orucov offered some commentary on the reasons behind the recent amendments to the religious law as well as an update on the process of re-registering all religious groups in the country. The USCIRF visitors heard the full spectrum of views of the extent of religious freedom in Azerbaijan, ranging from reports of total tolerance to those of an impending crisis. Post maintains that the situation regarding religious freedom, in actuality, lies somewhere in between. End Summary.

Orucov and the SCWRS

¶2. (C) With respect to the recent amendments to the Constitution vis--vis religious freedom and the ensuing laws from the Parliament which were recently passed, Orucov offered some noteworthy, though not surprising, comments:

¶A. Overall goal: Orucov cited the overall goal of changes to the Constitution as the protection of religious tolerance and the battle against radicalism, extremism, and terrorism. In these efforts, Orucov said, the goals of the U.S. and Azerbaijan overlap.

¶B. Re-Registration: The primary reason for the re-registration of all communities is to "prevent the politicization" of religion and help to maintain the strict policy separation of state and religion. The CMB received the first certificate of registration under the new legal regime; the Russian Orthodox Church received the second; and the Mountain Jews received the third. The Catholic Church's registration packet is currently under review.

¶C. Religious materials: Orucov noted that under the current version of the law, individual Azerbaijani citizens can import and produce religious literature and artifacts, whereas previously only religious organizations could do so.

Along these lines, Orucov noted that many countries have their own interest in Azerbaijan. Orucov described Iran as being very active, with extreme radical Shi'a groups who are trying to turn Azerbaijan into a Shi'a theocracy. Orucov did not leave out the fact that several (Sunni) Arab states have an interest in Azerbaijan as well. Regarding the SCWRS scrutiny of all religious material imported into Azerbaijan, Orucov said that such efforts were not censorship but rather examination of literature for religious expertise, designed to prevent attacks on Christian and Jewish groups, as well as Islamic groups, which might be influenced from abroad. In the last year, Orucov claimed that 10,000 books had been allowed to pass into Azerbaijan, while only 80-100 books had been refused, compared with past years in which 1,500 books per year would be admitted and up to 600 denied..

1D. Azerbaijani-trained citizens leading worship:

Orucov clarified that the new requirement that only Azerbaijani-trained citizens are permitted to lead worship applied only to Islam. For Christian and Jewish sects, for example, Azerbaijanis who will lead religious ceremonies are free to receive their education abroad.

13. (SBU) In her turn, Cosman raised the following concerns about the new religious laws: first, that religious communities are restricted to their legal address, in that such an amendment is problematic in the view of international law and OSCE commitments; additionally, Cosman added that many non-Muslims have reason to fear the way in which the legal address law will be applied. Orucov responded by saying that this stipulation is designed to prevent the influence of foreign radicals, citing the example of radical Shi'a influence in the country. Orucov added that anyone, in any place in the country, with a gathering of ten or more worshippers is eligible to register their religious community. Finally, Orucov noted that over 400 groups had

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submitted requests for registration, and Orucov had not yet heard any complaints. Regarding the ban on conscientious objection to military service, an issue which Cosman raised as being of concern to several devout groups, Orucov said that there has been a draft of a law designed to provide for this exception to military service, but given the on-going state of war in which Azerbaijan views itself to be, the Azerbaijani Parliament is not ready to discuss this. They are working on alternatives, however, such as not sending conscientious observers to the front line.

14. (C) Orucov also made a complaint about the favorable U.S. opinion of the former head of the Juma mosque and current head of the NGO DEVAAM, Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, and used this complaint to segue into his standard pitch about the lack of fact checking that goes into the preparation of the U.S. International Religious Freedom report. Poloff was quick to point out that the SCWRS was given an opportunity to comment on numerous points in advance of the publication of the report, many of which were incorporated into the report; Poloff added that the opening of the Juma mosque under new leadership had been correctly noted in the report. While Orucov noted that some of the information in the report accurately pointed out Azerbaijan's religious tolerance, and while he conceded Poloff's points and apologized for not being clear, Orucov still expressed concern about copying and pasting the previous year's report when preparing the religious freedom report.

16. (U) Orucov again expressed his interest in visiting Washington, D.C.
CMB

17. (C) During a meeting with the deputy imam at the CMB, Haji Salman Musayev notably expressed his objection to the amendment to the law in which only Azerbaijani-trained Muslim leaders could lead services. Additionally, Musayev called for all closed mosques to be re-opened. While the CMB is often quoted in the press expressing concern about hot-button issues such as mosque closures or amendments, the CMB rarely if ever challenges the government, making Musayev's comments more noteworthy.

¶8. (SBU) The OSCE mission in Baku, while well-informed on religious freedom, indicated that it did not have the consent of the government of Azerbaijan to pursue religious freedom issues. The Baha'i community expressed its concern to the USCIRF observers about guesthouses which had been confiscated in a property dispute going back several decades; Orucov was unaware of the issue but promised to look into it. The USCIRF members met with a representative of the evangelical Protestant Cathedral of Praise, which continued its complaint regarding the seizure of its land as well as concerns about registration. Additionally, they met with representatives of the Catholic Church, the Mountain Jewish community, and several other independent observers.

¶9. (C) Comment: While Orucov sang the country's praises, and others indicated that the sky is falling, Post maintains that the condition of religious freedom in the country is somewhere in between: for mainstream Islamic, Christian, and Jewish groups who are compliant with government controls, there is little, if any, limitation of freedom of religion; for actively-proselytizing non-traditional non-Islamic groups, as well as for Islamic groups which might be construed as having a radical slant or calling for a deeper role of Islam in politics, the government continues to look for ways to limit the impact of their message.

¶10. (U) The USCIRF members did not have an opportunity to review this report.

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